

**Mahmoud Ahmadinejad,
President of
Iran**

Improve Your Ability to Handle...

BY BERNARD LUSKIN

The only professionals who don't need to prepare for handling difficult conversations are those who don't work with other people. As university administrators and executives we engage in difficult conversations of all types. They are part of normal working life.

On September 24th Lee Bollinger, president of Columbia University, engaged in a volatile, difficult, public, televised conversation with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran. You may or may not know first-hand what happened during Ahmadinejad's campus visit. And it's very likely we'll receive even more incisive analyses of the strategy and tactics of the exchange between Bollinger and Ahmadinejad.

The controversial event took place without a riot or explosion, though the ripples still reverberate among Columbia's trustees and alumni. How was a level of decorum maintained despite expectations of a volatile, perhaps dangerous, situation?

Before the presentation, Bollinger was under verbal attack for permitting Ahmadinejad to speak. Word on the street was that Ahmadinejad was positioning to "bash Israel and the West." Then something tactical happened. Bollinger turned on Ahmadinejad during his introductory remarks. Specifically, Bollinger took an offensive stand against Ahmadinejad — calling him a "petty and cruel dictator" and labeling his Holocaust denials as either "brazenly provocative or astonishingly uneducated."

Interestingly, had Bollinger taken a typical academic stance, i.e., citing the importance of freedom of speech and the exchange of ideas, the likelihood of a volatile audience response would have escalated. Instead, Bollinger decided to take one of the world's most dangerous men to task. And he caught many listeners by surprise.

As the head of one of the world's prestigious universities, Bollinger used his position and personality to tame the intensity of the scene. By clearly stating facts, he defined Ahmadinejad's identity before he spoke, placing the Iranian president in a defensive posture.

Bollinger's display of his own feelings and opinions actually engendered sympathy and calmed the environment. What he did was diffuse a very difficult situation. Regardless of one's opinion on Ahmadinejad, and whether he should have been given a platform, Bollinger neutralized the reaction of a crowd on its way to becoming a mob. A potentially explosive event was managed to a relatively calm conclusion.



Difficult Conversations

Lee Bollinger,
President of
Columbia University

Lesson learned

The lesson is: There is always more than meets the ear. In earlier articles published in *The Greentree Gazette*, I've written about handling "incidents without precedent." This was certainly one of those. It required that the facts be told and his position be established fast. Bollinger did just that.

To diffuse a difficult conversation you must be able to convey (1) the facts, (2) your feelings and (3) the identity you want to project. You must display your own feelings in a constructive way. In this case, knowing he faced a difficult conversation, Bollinger took a risk. He did not follow typical protocols, and in my view, he saved that day.

Perhaps Ahmadinejad should or should not have been given the forum, but I admire the way Bollinger handled the situation that day.

Here's advice that always helps in difficult conversations: "Think Ahead and Take Your Time." This applies to dealing with an underperforming employee or negotiating with a difficult client. It applies when you're simply saying "no" or "I'm sorry" in a personal situation, or when you are addressing issues on the world scene. Bollinger gave the facts, articulated his position and moved on.

Avoid or confront?

This is the speaker's dilemma. Make your decision thoughtfully. Be prepared and be deliberate. Ask yourself, "Should I raise this issue or should I keep it to myself?" Tact is good...but it is not always the best answer. Confrontation was Bollinger's strategy. In the case of Ahmadinejad, Bollinger preserved his position by asserting facts and pinning blame, and it worked.

As a doctoral student at UCLA, I was involved in many "in-basket" exercises. Professor B. Lamar Johnson placed envelopes containing difficult conversation questions and topics in each student's "in-basket." We each prepared our response and placed it in an out basket. Then we all participated in an "after action analysis." Johnson said, "Imagine what is possible and how to achieve it." I think about those sessions often.

Consider difficult conversations a normal part of life. No matter your accomplishments or position, difficult conversations will always challenge you. Improving your ability to handle difficult conversations is professional development that's continuous.

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